

GLOBAL INEQUALITY AND CARE OF THE ENVIRONMENT: A POLITICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Emefiena Ezeani, Ph.D
Department of Political Science
Federal University Ebonyi State, Nigeria
&

Chiedu A. Onyiloha, PhD
University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract

For a long time now, care of the environment has been a major social, political and ethical issue because of environmental pollution, and because of wastage and the threat to lives on earth which results from environmental abuse. In spite of this awareness, the fight against environmental destruction does not seem to be yielding reasonable positive results. Resources of the earth continue to be exploited uncontrollably with equanimity. While people's environmental rights are trampled upon, little heed is paid to people's environmental duties. The inequality amongst nations of the earth, this paper argues, has enormous implication for environment and its care. While environmental pollution is caused by over-consumption of the earth's resources by the West, in the *Derailed Countries* or economically-less developed nations of the world, hunger and the search for means of sustenance contributes to environmental pollution. In order to ensure and sustain adequate care of the environment, the highly industrialised nations must not only take the lead but also approach the environmental duty of humanity with every seriousness and sincerity. Every political step towards the environment, no doubt, has ethical implications for everyone in the state. The writers adopt interdisciplinary research tools from the Political and Ethical sciences. Historical and phenomenological methods employed in this paper are aimed at resonating with the core issues with their consequences for the society. At the end, the research makes a clarion call to the society for global equality in the consumption of

the goods of the environment and also for all men and women to love, cherishes and cares for the environment--- as political and ethical duties.

Keywords: Global inequality, Care, Environment, Ethics, Environmental, Rights and Duties

Introduction

Since 1960s, concern for the environment has become a major issue, so much so that, these days, a number of academic disciplines have incorporated *environment* as a key subject-matter of study. Thus, some tertiary institutions offer such courses as *Philosophy and Environment*, *Environmental Psychology* or *Ecopsychology*. While the former deals with such issues as environment and ethics, the latter explores in great depth how physical spaces (environment) influence the way people feel, think and interact with the world. Environmental psychologists have drawn attention to how natural or built environments, climate change, and even outdoor recreation influence human behaviour, and the relationship between environment and human cognition. They thus, highlight the pedagogical or epistemological implications of the environment on human *knowability* (what is known). For example, Environmental psychologists like Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan state that the difference between reasonable and infuriatingly unreasonable behaviour is partly explainable by the environments in which people find themselves.

While the study on how humans are affected by the environment is a significant one, so also is how humans affect the environment. Both are, in essence, two sides of the same coin, and what humans give to the environment is what they get back from it. Actions of human cause environmental changes and environmental changes cause changes in human life and behaviour. This underscores the relevance and significance of *care of the environment* as an essential human responsibility, and a major issue in contemporary world politics.

This paper is divided into five sections. While section one briefly explains what the concept, *environment*, means, section two looks at the *state* of the environment. Section three highlights what constitute people's environmental rights and duties, gleaned from a number of *International Declarations*. Section four examines the notion of global inequality and how this threatens the environment. Lastly, section five looks at the role of *ethics* in environmental management.

What is Environment?

Environment is a surrounding, or a place or society where human beings live. It also means the earth and it includes the plants and animals in it. Some authors, like Donal Dorr (1990), see traditional cultures as part of people's environment. These days, the concept of environment has widened that it is now trendy to talk about such things as *Legal environment*, *Ethical environment*, *Economic environment*, *Political environment*, *Socio-cultural* and *Technological environment*. This paper is mainly concerned with the physical environment, which is the earth with its material and non-material elements and geographical units.

The State of the Environment

The mother earth has been declared to be ill as a result of dirty air, global warming, polluted waters, and toxic wastes. Polar glaciers are reported to be melting due to the effects of man's activities on the atmosphere and global temperature. The international consequences, which might follow the inevitable rise in sea levels, may not be imagined. The Tsunami episode still resides in the conscious faculty of many people. Attention is further drawn to the earth's poor health with such headlines and captions as:

A Billion Asians Could Be Parched in 24 Years
Forty million tons of toxic trash a year trades globally

Nearly two thirds of the 1,800 wells in Japan are contaminated with poisons
Ozone Hole Over Antarctic Is Back and Bigger.

How widespread is the problem, in other words, how sick is the earth and how are people's lives affected are questions whose answers can be deciphered from what is happening in the following environmentally-related areas (a) the *Oceans*, (b) *Forests*, (c) *Toxic Wastes* (d) *Chemicals*. It is now common knowledge that large sections of ocean are over fished, deforestation is on the increase, enormous quantities of toxic wastes or harmful materials are dumped on land and in the sea and hundreds of different chemicals in use today find their way into the air, water, soil and, sometimes, the food people eat. Abuse or recklessness in the use of the above elements threatens the earth and its inhabitants. The human tendency to exploit their environment 'as if it were an inexhaustible resource has repeatedly led to disaster, sometimes leading to the loss of entire human communities' (Greene, in Baylis *et al*, 2006: 452). As Pope John II did once note, world peace is not only threatened by arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustice among peoples, but also by a lack of due respect for nature. Human beings have some environmental obligations and environmental ideology embodies two relational concepts of duties and rights.

Environmental Rights and Duties

Every human person has a right to good life and the quality of one's life is dependent on one's environment and so, people have a right to a healthy and safe environment. Every people are supposed to get certain good things from their environment for their own welfare; happy and healthy living. These are called people's environmental rights. For example, people have a right to clean air and water.

Dinah Shelton (2012), John Baylis *et al* (2006 and 2008) haverecalled, as follows, a number of international conventions which have, for a long time, concerned themselves with the issue of environment. For instance, the *African Charter on Human and*

Peoples' Rights, (Banjul June 26, 1981) contains a number of provisions which are related to environmental rights. Article 24, for instance says: "All peoples shall have the right to a general satisfactory environment favourable to their development." In the same vein, Article 11 of the *Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (San Salvador, November 17, 1988) has the following proclamations:

1. Everyone shall have the right to live in a healthy environment and to have access to basic public services.
2. The States Parties shall promote the protection, preservation and improvement of the environment.

Principle 1 of the *Stockholm Declaration* links human rights to environmental protection, and, proclaiming man's fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, it also points out the responsibility of each person to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations. It upholds the belief that all individuals are entitled to live in an environment that is adequate for their health and well-being and calls for enhanced efforts towards ensuring a better and healthier environment.

The *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* looks at the issue of environment from a different perspective. Principle 10 of this document, for example, proclaims as follows:

Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and

the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available.

One can see from the above what constitutes people's environmental rights. In addition to rights, people have also obligations to the environment. The people's primary duty to their environment is to show respect to it. This means, among other things, that people should stop:

1. Wasting the resources of the earth/environment; for example, reckless use of firewood and leaving electric bulbs on when light is not needed.
2. Felling trees recklessly and indiscriminately which some people believe to be development, and a mark of civilisation and modernity. It does not seem to portend civilised behaviour as the act reduces one major source of oxygen human beings need, and results in increase in building up of carbon dioxide which is dangerous to humans, and other living creatures.
3. Indiscriminate burning of bushes as an effective method of hunting animals. Some people forget to realise that animals are also members of our earthly family and they ought to be respected and shown kindness. One who is cruel to animals is not far from being cruel and unkind to human beings.
4. Defecation in the bushes around people's homes – this grossly pollutes the environment. One would expect that it is time governments made it mandatory for every household to have, at least a pit latrine. The era of using bushes for 'long visits' in a country like Nigeria, ought to have ended by now.

Article 12 of the Law of Ukraine highlights some other environmental duties and they include the following:

1. Taking care of nature/environment, protecting and using its

- wealth wisely;
2. Not to violate the environmental rights of other people
 3. Paying due penalty for offenses relating to environmental abuses;
 4. Not to pollute the environment, as has been earlier noted.

Violation of the environmental rights of other people is to act unjustly towards them and it does not portend love of the people. As Pope Benedict XVI (2013) in his *Caritas in Veritate* says, “To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it”.Dorr talks about the need to have ecological wisdom which means being aware of oneself and others as part of the environment (earth) and the reason why one should respect the environment. One respects one's environment by avoiding exploitative attitude to it. This is a matter of justice because as Dorr points out, 'When we use the resources of the earth wastefully we are stealing from future generations. Furthermore, the wasteful use of resources by rich nations and classes takes place at the expense of poor nations and people.' (:23). For Dorr, there is a certain continuity between respect for nature and respect for people. He maintains that anyone who exploits the environment or animals will be inclined to exploit people as well. The above point is echoed by Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical, *Veritas in Caritate* as follows:

Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.

There is what is called '*Gaia hypothesis*' which says that all life on the planet earth should be seen as a single living organism which regulates its environment and its different parts so as to ensure its

own survival. This means, as Dorr avers, if humans threaten the pattern of nature by their reckless exploitation or destruction of nature, they risk their own survival. The truth of this can be seen from erosion sites and gullies in different parts of the society which are caused by deforestation. People upset nature/the earth and cause disaster by their indiscriminate cutting down of forests in the name of economic or modern development. In some parts of Nigeria, some people destroy important vegetation called *Aj?/?f?a* (Evil forests) to prove they are born-again Christians and have divine power behind them. It is essential for people to be aware of their obligations towards plants, even evil forests, animals and the earth which sustain them in the society in which they live. Environmental damage leads to diminution or destruction of human life. The survival of life on earth is assured when people do not disturb the balance of nature. Many people are suffering from different types of diseases these days because the air they breathe is polluted, the streams and rivers and seas are poisoned and there are many erosion sites in different states in Nigeria because forests are cut down and destroyed. Efforts have to be intensified in educating people on the importance of biodiversity and why they should be its promoters. Every creature on earth is important. People should help the earth, and all that it contains, to grow and not take part in its destruction.

Dorr also recognises, as people's environmental or ecological duty, the protection of their traditional cultures also being destroyed nowadays in the name of modernity, civilisation or Christianity. For Dorr, the ecological issue cannot be understood or tackled in isolation as it is intimately related to three other vital issues:

There is the question of the destruction of thousands of traditional cultures which have endured for centuries, giving meaning in life to millions of people; this font of experience of ways of being human, which had seemed to be inexhaustible, is now dwindling rapidly – and the whole nations and peoples are losing their sense of identity. (Dorr,

1990: 26).

The above observation by Dorr reminds one of the on-going campaigns against certain traditional practices and institutions in Africa. As Pope Benedict XVI has noted,

human beings interpret and shape the natural environment through culture, which in turn is given direction by the responsible use of freedom, in accordance with the dictates of the moral law ... Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society.

The Pope also links respect to life to respect to the environment. In his words:

If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology ... Today the subject of development is also closely related to the duties arising from *our relationship to the natural environment*. The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole.

It is a matter of political and moral obligation to protect one's environment since people's life; happiness, good health, and development depend largely on the nature of the environment. A healthy and safe environment is for the good of everyone, that is, the common good and it is the people's primary duty to ensure they have a healthy and safe environment. It is also their right to have such an environment. Every society and institutions therein, are influenced

by the social, political, economic, cultural environment and environment in turns influences people's social, political, economic, and cultural behaviour. Considered from global perspective, it seems that it is becoming difficult for people to have a healthy environment as their right as a result of inequality among nations.

Global Inequality and the Threat to Environment

The survival, health, and well-being of human beings depend very much on the condition of their environment. The care of environment thus becomes a major social and moral obligation of both the State and individuals in the State, and States cannot work in isolation in respect to taking care of the environment. Since the 20th Century, so much change has taken place in the world that no nation is any longer an island, entire unto itself. This is made possible as a result of the process or phenomenon known as globalisation. As a major event in world history, globalisation is a process of interconnectedness amongst nations and continents that what happens in one end of the world affects the other end. Global inequality is the existence of unequal political and economic relations amongst nations; it entails the possession of political and economic powers which enable some countries of the world to dominate others politically and economically. It also means dominance in the consumption of the earthly resources by these countries.

Nowadays, the world is spoken about as a 'global village' as the processes of globalisation intensified. The phrase, 'global village' conveys the idea of a world that is becoming more politically and economically united and culturally homogenous. This belief hides the fact that the decisions and activities in one part of the globe have uneven and highly differentiated consequences in their scope. Globalisation, like colonisation, can spread and entrench global inequality. In modern times, it is intimately connected with Westernisation, and is indeed, a subtle synonym or euphemism for

Westernisation. When clothed with a religious gab, globalisation sometimes appears as Christianisation. It has, therefore, some adverse political, ethical, cultural and economic dimensions and consequences on the *Derailed Countries*, especially, of Africa and Asia on their environments, which also impact upon the global environment.

Since most of the environmental problems are caused by human behaviour, they can only be reversed by corresponding human behaviour. The nature of international relations which is characterised by inequality makes the prospect of developing global synergy in tackling international environmental problems difficult. The relationship between the West and the Rest largely affects international environmental politics. National or human greed is a major obstacle to having substantial solution to environmental problems. One has to recall the huge political opposition to the *Kyoto Protocol* aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emission which compelled President George Bush to withdraw the US signature from the *Protocol* in 2001. Different Nigerian governments have continued to flare the nation's natural gas, an exercise which constitutes an environmental hazard and loss of revenue. The US Government's *Energy Information Administration* (EIA) claims that in 2007 natural gas flaring cost Nigeria US1.46 billion in lost revenue, noting, however,

The Government of Nigeria has been working to end natural gas flaring for several years but the deadline to implement the policies and fine oil companies has been repeatedly postponed with some analysts pushing the date as far forward as 2012.

The year 2012 has come and gone and nothing much has changed; Nigeria continues to flare large volumes of gas daily. Sarah Green (in Myers, 2009) of the *Amnesty International* believes that the Nigerian Government as a sovereign have the power to regulate properly but have consistently failed to do so. This is because, she

comments, the government has profited hugely from the oil companies and is worried about scaring them away. Unbeknown to different political administrations, the government's primary duty is to create an enabling environment for social and economic development. This means, among other things, provision of a reliable power supply, good road/railway networks, water supply, security, and a clean environment.

One reason for environmental apathy amongst industrialised countries of the world is purely economic; what they may lose protecting the environment. They often put politics and economy before healthy environment and coerce economically less developed countries to follow their steps. Only highly industrialised nations can seriously tackle environmental destruction at a global level. Greene does acknowledge that States do not generally have direct control of the economic activities which impact on the environment, yet they 'do have sovereign authority to legislate within their territories and thus must play a central role in developing and implementing any environmental regulations' (Greene in Baylis *et al*, 2006: 458). Individuals can deal with it from their homes and local surroundings by, for example, putting a stop to electric energy waste, recycling, using alternative energy and ethical investment, but a lot depends on the governments of highly industrialised economies.

Industrialized nations impact so much on the natural environment by their over-consumption of natural resources which are often located in economically less-developed nations, and as Vogler has stated, '... if everyone were to enjoy the current lifestyle of developed countries, more than three additional planets would be required' (Vogler in Baylis *et al*, 2008: 352). Resource depletion caused mainly by over-consumption of earthly resources by the West, for instance, is a serious social and environmental problem on *Derailed World* countries, often causing pollution. Pollution caused can affect the three main environmental elements - air, water and land. Excess heat which would otherwise get back into space is

trapped in the earth's atmosphere leading to increase in global temperature which is generally known as *global warning*.

In a country like Nigeria, environmental assessment which is a decision-making and planning tool is not taken seriously and this exercise is vital because it incorporates environmental factors and concerns into decision-making process and so, helps to prevent or minimise adverse environmental effects before they occur. The question as to whether oil companies operating in such countries as Nigeria take environmental concerns seriously is a political as well as ethical and epistemological question. From epistemological perspective, Anselm Adodo (2015) has noted that,

a knowledge-driven sustainable development must be pursued more forcefully to narrow the growing knowledge divide, which will not be achieved in large parts of Africa without a profound reform of knowledge. African societies must seriously take up the tremendous knowledge challenges they face. They must invest massively in knowledge to improve the social soil and environment on which it grows ... reduce knowledge deficits, free knowledge from impurities, strengthen knowledge infrastructures and institutions, fight knowledge obsolescence and increase knowledge performance. They must embark on a new adventure of knowledge leading to integral knowledge-led sustainable development (:13).

Though the countries where resources are exploited suffer more from environmental hazards, the entire world is also affected. The world or earth is one, what affects a part, affects the other, a truism beautifully expressed by John Donne in his poem, *No one is an island*. As some experts in this area have stated, the wholesale destruction of the earth's environment affects the vast majority of

the earth's population. Lack of plans to help economically less-privileged countries to solve their environmental problems such as pollution, provision of drainage system to check environmental pollution, and overcrowding, therefore, victimises not only these countries but the entire earth and all its human and non-human inhabitants. When the land, sea and air in Europe and North America are polluted the health of the earth is diminished. When the South American Amazon forest is destroyed, the health of the earth is impoverished. Desertification caused by reckless deforestation of vegetation of Africa and Asia inflicts deep wounds on the earth.

The Place of Ethics in Environmental Control

G.J. Warnock in his book, *The Object of Morality*, mentions some factors that could make things go wrong in society and so give rise to poverty, environmental damage and suffering. For him, and indeed it is in accord with right reasoning, the general object of morality (or 'moral evaluation') is to contribute 'to the amelioration of the human predicament' (Warnock, 1971: 16), that is, to make better the conditions of human beings in society. It can be argued that only those who possess sound moral qualities see it as a duty to ameliorate unpleasant human conditions. Warnock attributes human suffering (predicament) to a number of limiting factors, which are:

- (a) *Limited Resources*
- (b) *Limited Information*,
- (c) *Limited Intelligence*,
- (d) *Limited Rationality*,
- (e) *Limited Sympathies* (Warnock, 1971: 21).

After detailed consideration of the above-mentioned limiting factors, Warnock concludes that the greatest cause of human poverty, hunger, and suffering is limited sympathies. This is because there is ample evidence that there is an abundance of resources on earth to feed the population of the world multiplied by ten. Moreover, the knowledge and technology to exploit these resources are there. The problem arises in the distribution of resources. It is here that human or political

leaders' sympathy has a role to play; that is, in the equitable distribution of world resources. Here, one notices the relevance of Greene's claim that 'the causes of most environmental problems are closely related to the generation and distribution of wealth, knowledge, and power, and to patterns of energy consumption, industrialization, population growth, affluence, and poverty' (Greene in Baylis *et al*, 2006: 453). Warnock, therefore, concludes that for things to go well in society, people (leaders) must expand their sympathies. Warnock's logical argument is very important in light not only of what is happening in economic relationships (e.g. the terms of exchange) among nations, but also in the light of open and ruthless looting of the wealth of economically less developed countries by their leaders, and usually in criminal collusion with foreign agents and governments, and without any concern for its negative effects on the environment and the people. What can be extrapolated from all this is that the world political leaders' and multi-national companies' expansion of their human sympathies is a *conditio sine qua non* for achieving an effective care of the earth and its atmosphere. This is both a political and ethical requirement.

Greene (2006) strongly believes that environmental problems are global and that they 'can only be tackled through cooperation on a global scale' (: 452). Because environmental problems are global or transnational in nature and scope, they fall within the jurisdiction of international politics; they become the concern of governments all over the world. However, since there is inequality both in the use and abuse or exploitation of the resources of the earth, nations have *common moral but differentiated responsibilities* in caring for the environment.

Francis (2015) argues in favour of approaching the environment as a *mother earth*. Citing the works by Saint Francis of Assisi, he enjoins the strata of the society to be proactive in caring for the environment. The position of Francis resonates with the whole of humanity and real action is needed now than in the past. Francis' *Laudatosi*' has opened a new wave of environmental consciousness around the

world. Again, his call for global equality can never be lost in the world.

Conclusion

Global inequality and care of the environment is a great concern for the human race as well as for the non-human species. In the past, the issue was consigned to mere intellectualization or political talk. However, today, it is a real problem that requires real solution. As already argued in this paper, the concept of the environment is well known to humanity and the degradation of the same environment poses local and global problems. The different options and choices stare men and women on the face. Interdisciplinary approach is most appropriate for the environment to be appreciated and renewed for the present and future generations of mankind. Of all disciplines, political science and ethics owe humanity an urgent task to regard the environment as the mother earth. The writers urge all and sundry to appreciate the environment by doing the needful to balance the temporal goods of the earth in a just way and also in an equitable way beneficial to everyone in the society. Global inequality is an environmental issue in need of the care of the environment. The civil authority, the religious systems, the natives and the indifferent should re-think their perception of the goods of the earth in the light of charity, altruism and care.

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